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‘Already Given Over’: Activism in Inquiry and in the World

Introduction to the Second Special Issue

Marisa de Andrade, Nini Fang, Fiona Murray, Edgar Rodríguez-Dorans, Rosie Stenhouse,
Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract

This is the second of two part-issues on qualitative inquiry as activism. The first focused upon activism and/in the academy (academic work, academic cultures, academic practices, etc.), and this second focuses upon activism in the processes of research itself and activism beyond the academy, in the world. Drawing upon Butler’s claim that we are always already, from the outset, ‘given over’ to the human, non-human and more-than-human other, we argue with Markham et al. (2020, p.8) for qualitative research to do what it can “to spark and enact better ethical futures”.

Keywords: qualitative inquiry; activism

Corresponding author:

Jonathan Wyatt

Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences
University of Edinburgh
Old Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9AG

Tel.: +44 (0)131 651 3974

Fax: [Click here and type author fax]

E-mail: jonathan.wyatt@ed.ac.uk

URL: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/jonathan-wyatt>

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Author bios:

Marisa de Andrade is Programme Director for the MSc by Research in Health Humanities and Arts and Associate Director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh. As a critical health policy scholar, she uses creative (and conventional) methodologies to challenge structural causes of inequality.

Nini Fang is a lecturer in counselling, psychotherapy, and applied social sciences (CPASS) at the University of Edinburgh.

Fiona Murray is a lecturer in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

Edgar Rodríguez-Dorans is a qualitative researcher and mental health practitioner interested in the study of identities, sexualities, the everyday lives of LGBTQIA+ people, and the use of performing arts in research. He currently works as a Mental Health Mentor at the Student Disability Service at the University of Edinburgh.

Rosie Stenhouse is Senior Lecturer and Associate Director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh

Jonathan Wyatt is Professor of Qualitative Inquiry and Director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh. His book, *Therapy, stand-up, and the gesture of writing: Towards creative-relational inquiry*, published by Routledge in 2019, won the 2020 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Book Award.

‘Already Given Over’: Activism in Inquiry and in the World

Introduction to the Second Special Issue

What these words do

We write in Scotland in the northern hemisphere Spring of 2021. We write in separate places in and around Edinburgh. We are in our homes (Rosie, Edgar, Fiona, Nini) and offices at the University (Marisa, Jonathan) and are together as six squares on a screen. A semblance of touch. It is some months after we put together the introduction to the first of these two partial special issues (14, 1) in ‘qualitative inquiry as activism’, both of which arose out of the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Edinburgh in February, 2019. The first part-issue explored activism and/in the academy. This second collection focuses on activism in the processes of research and activism in the world, although, as we noted in that first introduction, “the overlaps and conversations between them are both obvious and significant: inquiry is part of, rooted in, the academy; inquiry and the academy are both of, and in, the world.” (Rodríguez-Dorans et al, 2021, p.564)

We write at a time when, perhaps more than ever, we need to recognise and engage the potential for qualitative inquiry to do activism. We are twelve months into a pandemic that has laid bare the impact of the colonial history of the West. Covid-19 illuminates existing inequalities that are contributing, these weeks in late April and early May, to India experiencing in the region of 400,000 new infections a day and a critical shortage of oxygen (WHO, 2021). In the UK, people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities in the UK are more likely to catch the virus and more likely to die from it (Nazroo et al. 2020; Dowd, A. 2021); and there is a rise in anti-Asian violence, stoked by the pandemic being racialised as a disease of the East, with members of Asian communities in the West being attacked, publicly shamed and murdered (Fang & Liu, 2021). The killing of George Floyd in the US in 2020, following a string of both well-known and invisible killings of Black people by the police, which led to global support for Black Lives Matter, has been followed by trial of the police officer accused of George Floyd’s murder, ending in recent weeks with the conviction of Derek Chauvin. All the while, our planet and our other-than-human and more-than-human kin are in deep crisis. Air pollution ravages our cities (and beyond), our seas and waterways clogged with plastic refuse, our polar ice caps melting. Environmental catastrophe is all but upon us. And across the globe people are being displaced by violence, famine, political unrest.

There is more, so much more, of course. The paragraph above leaves out much and provides only the barest, most simplistic rendering of the state of the moving, always changing globe at one moment of writing. Nevertheless, it is unarguable that the scale, urgency and complexity of the challenges our world is experiencing are immense. Such scale, urgency and complexity can be overwhelming and alienating. How can we make sense of, translate, these big issues within our lives? We maybe experience frustration, anger, a sense of futility, and more, in the face of it all. It can lead to a switching off, a belief that

there is nothing we can do to make a difference. What possible responses can we make? What meaningful actions can we take? How do we sit with what we know, and endure what we don't?

We are writing, together and apart, scattered and collective. One of us writes, unique but for us all:

"I'm struck by the passing of time and events and choices over recent months that have been out of my control. And still, I've been swimming. Swimming against the tide, fighting for control.

I'm struck by what it means to hang on to a life buoy, while others drown. What it means to hold on tightly, as if my life depended on it.

I'm struck by what it means to hold on with purpose.

Hit by wave upon wave of change and uncertainty, an exhaustion fuelled by a relentless force I feel is outside of me, I'm in touch (sometimes) with an inner force that is guiding me.

It helps me do little things, one moment at a time. Get out of bed when it's dark with horizontal rain hitting my broken roof tiles, reminding me that I need to fix that leak. Sit down to a blank page. No thoughts in my head, deep breaths as I steady myself.

What am I trying to say and why does this feel so important? These words that appear on this page. They're like a little squeak when I look at the law of the land and the headlines of the day.

What will these little words do?

How will these little words make any difference to the status quo, to the way things are?

I don't know.

I feel powerless and vulnerable, completely overwhelmed by the structures and social objects and limitations of every decree, every piece of evidence, every decision made that claims to be just but, in my mind, is just missing the point.

This is activism, I realise. And it's slow and painful, ebbing and flowing with every word.

The putting together of both this introduction and this collection has been, and remains, slow and painful. Our text ebbs and flows with each letter written then perhaps deleted, written and deleted, each hesitant step taken to convey the work of these contributions. Yet our text refuses passivity; and it resists despondency. It – we – harnesses its inner and its collective force, to do the little things, the acts of activism (Madison, 2010), the "Slow, Tiny,

Acts of Resistance” (Harré et al; see also Rodríguez-Dorans et al, 2021). “What is clear,” write Markham et al. (2020, p. 8), “is that qualitative research can continue to move in activist directions, to do research that matters for the communities we work in and with, and to do what we can to spark and enact better ethical futures.”

Activism as an orientation

In *21 Lessons for the 21st century*, Yuval Noah Harari (2018) writes:

“In theory, anybody can join the debate about the future of humanity, but it is so hard to maintain a clear vision. Frequently, we don’t even notice that a debate is going on, or what the key questions are. Billions of us can hardly afford the luxury of investigating, because we have more pressing things to do... Unfortunately, history gives no discounts. If the future of humanity is decided in your absence, because you are too busy feeding and clothing your kids – you and they will not be exempt from the consequences.” (p. ix)

‘The luxury of investigating’ is a phrase that stays with us, noting how undertaking research requires resources: personal, social, financial. We, and this issue’s contributors, note the need to approach this work with caution and critical reflexivity. Our good intentions can be undermined by our own subjective positions and the capital that we stand to gain from doing such work. Positioning ourselves as activist ‘on behalf of’ populations who are marginalised, or who do not have the luxury of investigating issues often due to the lack of the social, economic, health or other capital associated with being part of a marginalised group, carries risks. These risks are not generally borne by the researcher but by the people who are the focus of the research, on whose behalf we might hope to speak, such intentions so often captured in the politically and ethico-onto-epistemologically (Barad, 2009) problematic phrase ‘give voice to’. Even when we engage in a partnership, or in a co-productive manner, there are risks we colonise others’ experience for our own gain as academics (through publishing and ‘getting on’ in the academic institution) and that participants lose control over their story, their identity.

For example, one of us engaged with a group of mental health service users to support the development of a service-user led project. She co-authored with a mental health survivor. She perceived her work as activist, as opening up spaces for the voices of people with lived experience of mental health service use to be heard in the arenas of policy, practice and education. However, while there were similar aspirations amongst participants for the impact of such work, for some of those with whom she worked there was a sense that they were giving of their time, their ideas, but also giving *over* their personal stories. Instead of feeling paralysed by this and by the stories themselves, and following Judith Butler (2004), she persisted with responding and acting, aware of how the other makes an unsolicited demand. Through the inquiry’s local, situated stories, connections with the global stories (reports of poor care in the media and in other research reports), she experienced the ethical obligation to work towards the improvement of others’ “precarious lives” within the mental health care system. In the precarity of others’ lives lies the precarity of all our lives, all of us mortal and vulnerable, all of us from the outset, always “already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (p. 28).

In the maelstrom of global crisis, it can be easy to feel disoriented, lost, and even powerless, as actions seem to be needed more than research, but inquiry is also a need, an imperative.

This collection, *Activism in Inquiry and in the World*, plays its part in calling us onward. The collection of papers in this special issue speak to, and embody, the need to engage with those small, big – proximal, distal – issues. We read of researchers immersed in the process of inquiry and deeply embedded in and committed to social, political, and environmental justice. We see their work being activist in attitude, in action, in theory, in aesthetics, in bodies, in text. There seems no boundary between what and where activism is. Activism seems an orientation, above all. Together, these contributions suggest a perspective that sees the specifics of social, national, cultural contexts as carrying something of the whole, something beyond. They speak to and of the local in a way that also carries the global; local, situated manifestations of ‘global issues’¹; politically, culturally, materially particular renderings of pressing issues that affect us all, directly or indirectly. The large, the mystified, the incomprehensible, made small, immediate, vivid, intricately complex.

These contributions call us forth as qualitative researchers to orientate ourselves towards activism. They call us into action and engagement, into recognising what’s possible and what’s necessary, into responding to Haraway’s summons to ‘stay with the trouble’, given we are all in this together as “mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.” (Haraway, 2016, p.1), given over, from the outset, to each other and our planet kin (Haraway, 2016) from the outset.

Belonging together

In our different writing spaces and together on the screen we re-engage with the thirteen articles in this collection. We look again at their titles, we scan their abstracts and absorb their texts. They return to us, they begin to find their ways back into and between our bodies. We last read them more than a year ago, in February 2020, before our lives were changed by COVID-19, although others’ lives (in China, for example) were already being affected. Some of us were attending the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ECQI) in Malta at that time, a year after the original event in 2019, ECQI in Edinburgh, that gave rise to these articles. It has been over two years. So much has happened since then, and since we last settled with these articles and came to know them so well as we and others reviewed them and as we began to experience them in relation to each other and the whole.

The articles are published now online, ploughing independent furrows alongside unrelated others, finding readers as they stand alone. For us, now, they belong together again, in solidarity:

Leah Salter’s research as resistance and “radical relating” with (and as) women who have experienced trauma; Briana Bivens putting postqualitative theories and practices to work with an inquiry into social movement organising; Phiona Stanley troubling ‘volunteer

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/>

tourism', local practices of resistance, and academic activism itself; Sarah Strauven arguing for the relational practices of narrative therapy as offering possibilities for addressing and responding to social justice issues; Mathias Sune Berg & Helle Winther showing how a multimodal methodological perspective can strengthen the voices of children in educational research; and Angela Cotter exploring how activism can find its way into the professional psychotherapy education. These authors, these texts, connect activism in/and inquiry across nation states, across cultures, across disciplines, across theoretical frames.

Together with Gabriel Soler, who transports us through his writing-as-inquiry into how the activism of his aunt and uncle during the late 20th century dictatorship in Chile lives on in him; and with Anne Beate Reinertsen, whose Deleuze-inflected "nomadic showing waiting" challenges the prevailing reification of knowledge and speaks instead to the importance in activist inquiry of not knowing, for the position of non-knowledge as activism; and Natalia Martini exploring the challenges in inquiry that seeks to establish meaningful contact in two Polish cities between those who are homeless and those who are housed.

There is both intensity and diversity in and between all these approaches to and examples of qualitative inquiry as activism: in and between how Birgitte Ravn Olesen brings into view the "tensions in the interplay of power [that] can never be eradicated" in her reflexive account of using Forum Theatre with young refugees. How Dina Brode-Roger takes us into the complexities and contradictions of the 'Arctic Imaginary' and the persisting, long-established colonial assumptions that continue to affect those who live there. How Gabriel Soler, David Purnell, and Daniel Clarke bring the vulnerability of their relationships with their fathers to seek new understandings of what it means to be a man. How Grace O'Grady's performative autoethnography artfully works with and through her personal experience of abdominal surgery and consequent early menopause to confront prevailing medical and institutional discourses. And how Alison Rouse draws upon the "political and moral enterprise" of drawing and painting as inquiry to explore how we respond to images of war.

We – all these texts, these authors, and us – are together, belong together, on the screen, bringing this long journey from an Edinburgh conference in February 2019 to a close, bringing these words to an ending; for now. We let these words, and the words throughout these two collections, go. We wait to see what they will do. We have been given over for so long to this project, to each other, to our contributors, to those (and that which) they write about, yet there is more this project needs to do. There is more it needs to do, to generate, in the academy, in inquiry, and in the world, as we all continue to be "compelled to take stock of our interdependence" (Butler, 2004, p. 26) with and between the human, material and the more-than-human.

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